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The Snake in Chinese Belief

DENISE CHAO

THE snake is a common symbol in the religious beliefs, ceremonies and legends in many cultures. The odd appearance of the snake, its unwinking eye and its awe-inspiring ability to cause instant death, the fear, horror and loathing with which it is regarded by men, all have combined to bring about mythological stories in many different parts of the world. Man's ideas of the snake have always been ambivalent; it is a creature crawling on the earth that also suggests rebirth in its ability to shed its skin and be revitalized every spring. In Western tradition it duped our first parents, Adam and Eve, who were later expelled by God from Eden's paradise; but a brazen serpent was raised by Moses, an action prefiguring Christ. The treacherous snake in the grass is appalling but its prudence is to be emulated.

In India, the Caffres fear to kill a serpent. The man who happened to put it to death, whether in self-defence or otherwise, was required to lie in a running stream of water during the day for several weeks. The body of the snake was then taken and carefully buried in a trench, dug close to the cattle-fold, where its remains, like those of a chief, were henceforward kept perfectly undisturbed. The period of penance, as in the case of mourning for the dead, is now happily reduced to a few days. In Madras, it is considered a great sin to kill a cobra. When this has happened, the people generally burn the body of the snake, just as they burn the bodies of human beings. The murderer deems himself polluted for three days.[1]

In truth, the 'snake' symbols appear everywhere. The tail-eating snake stood for the world with the ancient Egyptians; it was accepted by the Alexandrian alchemists and reappeared in the Scandinavian *Prose Edda* as Midgardsorm, the snake lying in the middle of the ocean which surrounds the world.[2] The use of the emblem should be related to the use of the circle form to symbolize eternity and to the traditional way of representing Time, the divine principle of eternal and inexhaustible creativeness, as a divine figure with a serpent round him.[3]

In Greek mythology, the Goddess of wisdom and the Goddess of victory hold a shield painted with a snake form. The hairs of the Goddess of vengeance are in the shape of snakes. The Greeks regarded certain non-venomous snakes as sacred to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, who was depicted carrying a wand with a serpent coiled around it. In the Greek myths, snakes also symbolized fertility, both because of the phallic appearance and their home in the earth. China abounds in stories of snakes.

SNAKES IN CHINA'S GENESIS

Pan Ku was the most ancient ancestor and the creator of the world. In the very beginning, the universe was dark and looked like an 'egg'. Pan Ku was

asleep in its centre for eighteen thousand years. When he awoke, he saw nothing. Filled with anger at this awkward condition, he broke the 'egg' with a hammer: its light element was floating in the air and became Heaven, while its heavy element descended and became Earth. Because he was afraid that Heaven and Earth would come together, he prevented their coalescing by interposing his head and feet. In proportion as Heaven went up and Earth thickened daily, he himself grew ten feet taller every day. After eighteen thousand years, he was eighteen thousand feet tall, so that Heaven and Earth were eighteen thousand feet apart. When he revelled in something, there was a sunny day; when he was dispirited, there was a rainy day. It is said that he had a dragon's head and a serpent's body.[4] After innumerable years in this station of life, he died, or rather his whole body became metamorphosed.

Pan Ku's breath was transformed into wind and storm, while his voice became the thunder. His left eye became the sun, while his right eye became the moon. His hands, feet and his chest became the four ends of the universe and famous mountains. His blood made up rivers; his nerves, the roads, and his muscles, the fields; his hair and moustache, the stars of Heaven. His down turned into flowers, grasses and trees; his teeth, bones and marrows, into meadows, stones, pearls and jewels. His sweat became rain and dew.[5]

NÜ WA AND FU HSI

There exist two tales concerning Man's creation: one is that the parasites of Pan Ku's body turned into men; another is that Nü Wa, a goddess represented as half human and half snake, created men. When Pan Ku created Heaven and Earth, there was no man yet. Nü Wa crouched down and dug the yellow mud and, mixing it with water, she moulded a doll, which, when laid down, became Man. She was very fond of her creation so that she improvised many men and women; naked as they were, they danced around her. Nevertheless the earth was too spacious for a small number of men. As creation seemed too tedious to her, she took a rope and dipped it into the mud, and trailed it about so that drops fell off. From the moulded specimens came the noble and rich, while those who fell off the muddy rope were the humble and poor.[6] Hereafter earth abounded in myriads of men. To do away with a continuous production of men, Nü Wa instituted marriage and taught men to bear children themselves, and as such the human race would propagate and multiply. Hence people worshipped her as a 'match-maker' goddess and also worshipped a piece of stone in the form of a reproductive organ, which they put on her altar.

In the famous painting 'Adam and Eve' by William Blake there appears in the apple tree a snake with a human head; succumbing to its flattery, Eve ate the forbidden apple and thus became Adam's consort. In other words, the snake served as the 'match-maker' of male and female. It seems to me that the legend known as 'Nü Wa's creation of mankind' contains a motif very similar to that of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve who became consorts through the serpent.

Nü Wa was also the repairer of the universe. One day the god of water, Kon Kon, having a human face and a snake's body, fought against the god of fire

Chu Jung. He lost the war and became so ashamed and furious that he knocked his head on the Pu Chou mountain, the pillar of the firmament. When the pillar crumbled, half heaven collapsed, forests were ablaze and the earth was inundated with great floods. Driven by grief at this catastrophe, Nü Wa melted the multi-coloured stones and cut off the four legs of a huge tortoise for replacing the four corners of the earth. She also burned reed grasses to ashes which were used for stopping great floods and thus brought to end the human calamities.[7]

It is said that Nü Wa was always associated with Fu Hsi who, in the legendary account of pre-dynastic China, was the first of the Three Sovereigns (2852–2697 B.C.).[8] Nü Wa was either Fu Hsi's younger sister, or, once she invented marriage, his wife. As a pair, Fu Hsi and Nü Wa appeared together; their upper bodies were human, but merged below into serpent's tails that were intertwined with one another (Plate 1). The intertwining of her body with that of Fu Hsi on the bas-relief of Wu Liang Tzŭ (Shantung), on the paintings on silk discovered in the Han Dynasty tombs excavated at Mawangtui (Changsha Province), Nanyang (Honan Province), Chengtu and

Plate 1. The intertwining of the bodies of Nü Wa and Fu Hsi. Rubbing from a bas-relief of Wu Liang Tzŭ (Shantung Province).

Chungch'ing (Szechuan Province), Turfan (Sinkiang) bore a suggestion that Nü Wa and Fu Hsi were wife and husband (Plate 2). Another explanation is that Fu Hsi was duly assisted by Nü Wa during his reign. Fu Hsi, it is said, carried a set-square, Nü Wa had compasses; it is also said that Fu Hsi held a sun in which there was a golden crew, Nü Wa held a moon with a toad inside. Compasses and set-square symbolized order and proper conduct.

The Chinese people from early Han to T'ang Dynasty worshipped by and large Fu Hsi and Nü Wa in the belief that both of them were their forbears and their guardian spirits after death. As a result, their pictures were engraved on tombstones, painted on funeral banners covering inner coffins, and served as tutelary genii of the dead (Plate 3).

Plate 2. Nü Wa and Fu Hsi. Painting on silk from a Tan tomb excavated at Turfan.

One may ask how it comes about that Fu Hsi and Nü Wa, though men, were depicted as having a human head and a snake's body? Is it really true? I believe that Fu Hsi and Nü Wa were metamorphosed to be the totems of ancient tribes on the principle that like produces like, and all primitive totemic tribes commonly practised the homeopathic or imitative magic. Primitive people wore also the skin of their totemic animal or another part of their totem as an amulet; the image of the totemic animal was sometimes tattooed

upon the body of the tribesmen and was sometimes revered as an ancestor, sometimes as ancestral god. Fu Hsi and Nü Wa who belonged to the snake tribe worshipped the snake and wore its skin as a token of its respect. The custom of worshipping snakes originated in a totemic system. In the *Shan Hai Ching (The Land and Water Classics)*, of fifty-eight tribes which had totemic systems, eight had snake totems. Nü Wa had a snake's body, and she and her clans wore the snake's skin and worshipped it. The fact that they revered the snake and called themselves after it would seem to show that the life of each individual of the tribe is bound up with the snake, and this very animal must benefit them who put their faith in it.[9]

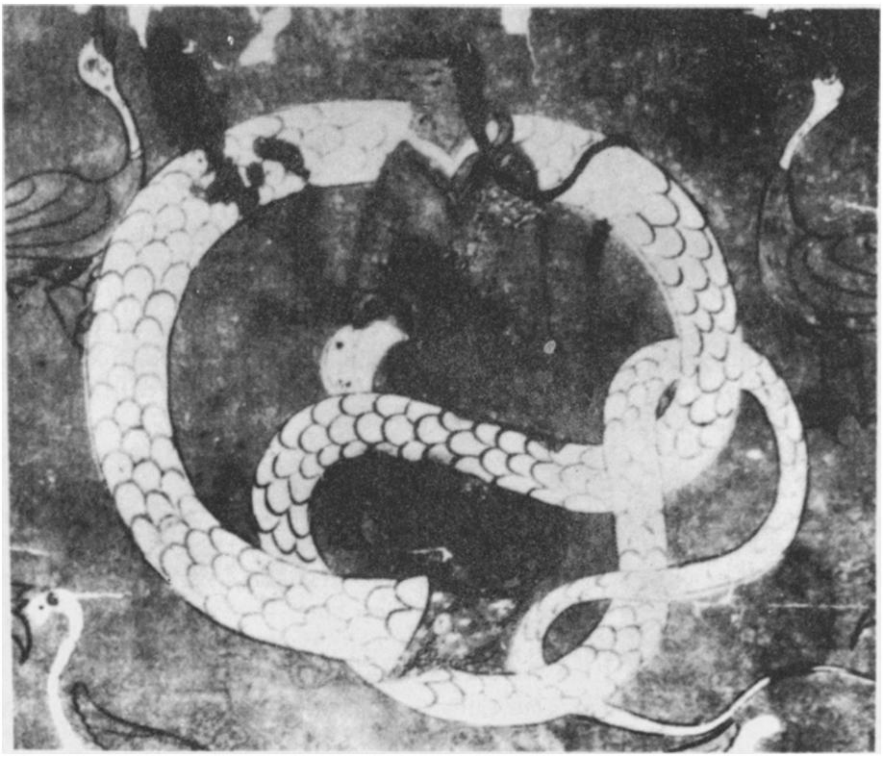

Plate 3. Fu Hsi with a serpent's tail. Colour painting on silk (funeral banner covering the inner coffin) from a Han tomb at Mawangtui.

Furthermore it appears that the snake was venerated because of its form or its tenacity of life, and was made representative of phallic significance. Likewise certain round oval objects, discs, certain fruits and natural caves were worshipped as symbolizing the female generative organ. An account of the phallicism was given in the *Chinese Review* of 1876 under the title 'Phallic Worship in China.' It is said that Kheen or Shang-ti, the Chinese deities of sex, were worshipped in the form of serpents, and the dragon of the Chinese was its modification. Along with the phallic worship there were phallic

ceremonies which expressed the desire for human reproduction and children.

Fu Hsi was also the god of spring. He invented the harp as well as a song called Jia Bien. The harp had fifty strings. When one goddess was asked to play the harp, it produced a lugubrious sound; Fu Hsi interrupted its playing. At the refusal of the goddess player, Fu Hsi broke this harp in two, so that the lugubrious sound was attenuated to half as much. Henceforth, the Chinese harp had no more than twenty-five strings.[10]

Fu Hsi invented Eight Diagrams from which was developed a whole system of philosophy. On the banks of the Meng River, Fu Hsi saw a huge, tall monster on the surface of the water. The monster had a horse's body, scales of a fish and several feet; on its back it carried a tablet. Fu Hsi waved it on the banks and the monster directly complied with the request. Fu Hsi took possession of the tablet and found fifty-five lines which were intertwined with figures. He studied the tablet at Fu Shan and composed the Eight Diagrams. Fu Hsi also taught people how to make fishing nets and to make fire for cooking and warmth.

The second of the Three Sovereigns was Yen Ti or Shen Nung. As he was the god of sun, he made grain grow. Inventing the cart and various types of agricultural implements, he taught men agriculture. His brother, Huang Ti, the third of the Three Sovereigns, appeared in the centre of the heaven and was the supreme ruler. He waged war against the evil spirit Ch'ih Yu who tried to seize his power. At the beginning of the war, Huang Ti could hardly win it because of a dense fog. One of his ministers invented a compass by which Huang Ti penetrated the fog and defeated Chi'ih Yu. All the Three Sovereigns had a human head and a serpent's body.

SNAKES IN CHINESE CLASSICS

In the Chinese Classics, snakes were spoken of many times; in *Shan Hai Ching*, the story goes that in South China there was a serpent having a length of 600 feet; its skin colour was of blue, yellow, red and black. It swallowed an elephant and after three years its body was burst by the elephant's bones. Those people who ate this snake's meat could avoid suffering from cardiac and intestinal diseases.[11]

The god of Chun Shan, Chu Lung, had a man's face and a snake's body; his red body was one thousand miles long and his peculiar eyes looked like two standing olives. When they were closed, they looked like two seams, and there was night; when they were open, there was day. Whenever Chu Lung inhaled, a heavy snow fell and winter came; while he breathed out, there was a hot sun and summer. His mysterious force could brighten and dispel the darkness of Nine Hells. It is said that his mouth held a candle which served to brighten the northern heavenly gate.[12]

There was a strange serpent called Vei Yi living in Hua Shan (in Shensi Province, 37,500 feet high). It had one head, two bodies, six feet and four wings. When it was seen by people, the country would suffer a long drought.[13] A singing serpent dwelling in Shien Shan had four wings and sang like a musical instrument made of sonorous stone. This singing serpent would also bring a severe drought to people who saw it. Some other serpents living in

Yang Shan had a human face, a wolf's body and a bird's wings. They made shouting noise like 'tut tut'. When they appeared, the land would undergo the deluge.[14]

Shiang Liu, Kon Kon's minister, was extremely greedy. With nine human heads and a serpent's body entirely blue, it could eat simultaneously on nine different hills.[15] What it spewed from its mouth became great rivers. It was so ferocious that all other animals were afraid of it. Finally it was killed by Hsia Yüü who regulated water courses.

SYMBOL OF GOOD LUCK

Contrary to the Western belief that the snake is an evil omen, the Chinese people deemed it a symbol of good luck and prosperity. There is a significant story in Chinese history about a two-headed snake named Wei-t'o which was as big as a wheel hub, as tall as a carriage shaft and had a purple robe. When it heard the sound of thunder or a carriage, it grasped its vermilion head and stood up. Anyone who saw it would soon become a dictator. Having seen this snake while setting off on a journey in the countryside, Duke Huan was so frightened that he thought he would soon die. But when his officer, a soothsayer, described this kind of snake as boding a good augury, the Duke's face lit up, and he said with elation: 'that must have been the very snake I saw.' Then he straightened his robe and sat up on the mat with Kuan-tzu; before the day was over, though he did not notice it, his illness went away.[16]

When the Minister of Ch'u, Sun Shu-ho (6th century B.C.) was a boy, he beheld a two-headed snake which he killed and buried. He then went home and cried before his mother. She asked him what was the matter. Her son replied: 'I have heard that whoever sees a two-headed snake must die; now when I sallied out, I saw a two-headed snake. I am afraid that I must leave you and die, hence I shed tears.' Upon this is mother inquired where the snake was then, he rejoined: 'For fear that others should see it later and die, I killed it outright and buried it.'[17] The mother said: 'I have heard that Heaven will recompense hidden virtues. You are certainly not going to die, for Heaven must reward you for your good deeds.' And, in fact, Sun Shu-ho did not die; instead, he became the Prime Minister of Ch'u state.

SYMBOL OF PROSPERITY

According to early Chinese cosmogony, the interaction of the Yin and Yang results in the production of the Five Powers or the Five Elements and from these the physical universe is produced. The Five Elements are five dynamic forces, the first of which is named Water, the second, Fire, the third, Wood, the fourth, Metal and the fifth, Soil. They are mutually friendly or antagonistic to each other. The Yin-Yang school correlated the four seasons with the four compass points. Summer was correlated with the south; winter with the north, spring with the east, because it is the direction of sunrise; and autumn with the west because it is the direction of sunset. Summer is the time in which the power of Fire is dominant; winter is the time in which the power of Water is dominant. Likewise, the power of Wood is dominant in the east and in spring because it is the time in which the wood and plants begin to

grow. The power of Metal is dominant in the west and in autumn, the bleak time when growing plants reach their end. Soil is the centre of the Five Elements and its time of domination is said to be a brief interlude between summer and autumn.[18] The east is symbolized by a blue dragon, while the south, by a phoenix; the west, by a white tiger; and the north, by a serpent and a tortoise. These animals, called the Supernatural Creatures representing the four quadrants of the heavens, have exerted an influence over national life, especially in the domain of geomancy.

In Han Dynasty, the round tiles used to build the eaves of the palace were sculptured with two kinds of designs: that of a blue dragon and that of a serpent and a tortoise together. The former was placed on the east side eaves, and the latter on north side ones (Plate 4). Both blue dragon and serpent together with tortoise were the mascots which would bring peace and prosperity to the people who believed in them.

Plate 4. A round tile showing a serpent and a tortoise, associated with the north and with winter whose element was water and whose colour was black.

From Han tombs recently unearthed in Yunan Province, we find more evidence that the serpent was one of the main auspicious portents for the ancient Chinese. The shape of serpents appeared on various weapons, pillars, name seals and artistic productions. Princes usually had a camel or a serpent as motifs atop their name seals, whereas ministers and generals had tortoises carved on their personal seals.

At the entrance of Buddhist temples, there stand usually four god-custodians of the world (Ssu Ching Kan) holding each an instrument; and the four instruments symbolize timely winds and rains. One holds a sword, another a guitar, the third an umbrella and the last a snake.[19] The sword's sharp edge sounds like 'Fung', timely 'wind'; guitar standing for harmony; the umbrella implying timely 'rain,' and the snake being consonant with prosperity. In fact, the timely winds and rains are always longed for by the public, particularly the farmers. That the year of the snake represents a flourishing year is based on the above belief.

THE MOST POPULAR STORY OF A SNAKE

The story of the 'White Snake' or 'Madam White' is well-known and overwhelmingly popular in China; the story is said to occur in the Shao-Hsing reign (1131–62 A.D.) of the Sung Dynasty after the removal of the emperor Kao-Tsung and his court to the south of China.

There was a young man called Hsü Hsüan who had a sister married to Li Jen, a levy officer in the Treasury of the Army administration; their father had died in Hsü Hsüan's childhood. At the age of twenty-two he worked as a clerk in the herbalist's shop of a cousin, Squire Li. At the Ching-ming festival (April 5th) when the tombs of the ancestors were swept, Hsü Hsüan rose early, bought the requisite items of paper images of deities and wax candles, and set out to the house of Squire Li to beg a day's leave. Then he left at once for Pao-shu Pagoda to burn paper offerings and pray to his ancestors. When he had made his offerings at Pao-shu Pagoda, he came out of the monastery, but rain began to fall. He then removed his new shoes and socks, and walked barefoot to look for a boat. The old boatman sailed Hsü Hsüan for Golden Flood Gate; the boat had not sailed a hundred feet, when a shout was heard from the jetty: 'Old Uncle, please take a passenger!' It was a woman, her black hair curled up as in mourning; standing by her was a servant girl dressed in green, holding a bundle in both hands and waiting for a boat. When Hsü Hsüan responded to their call, the boatman brought the boat along-shore where the woman and her servant girl stepped into the boat. When the woman saw Hsü Hsüan, she came forward and made a low bow, and he stood up in a great haste to return the bow. The lady and her maid then sat in the cabin; but the lady kept rolling her eyes at Hsü Hsüan. The young man, however innocent he was, could not help being infatuated when he saw this flower-like attractive woman accompanied by her equally enchanting maid. The woman began to speak: 'May I ask the honorable gentleman's surname, name and residence?' Hsü Hsüan replied: 'My surname is Hsü and my name Hsüan; I live in Black Pearl Lane by the Army Bridge.' Soon, the boat was sailing close to the shore. The woman said: 'I left the house in a

great haste and forgot to take money with me; would you be kind enough to lend me the fare?' Hsü Hsüan tendered the fares, and it was still raining hard and so he lent her also his own umbrella.

The following day when Hsü Hsüan called on Madam White, she received him and prepared food and wine. When Hsü Hsüan ate and drank to his fill, he rose and said: 'It is getting dark, and I must return at once.' Madam White said: 'If you must go, please come back and fetch your umbrella.' Next day, Hsü Hsüan hastened away to Madam White to collect his umbrella. Again Madam White dined and wined Hsü Hsüan. She then said: 'Before such a young and charming gentlemen as you, I will be frank. I have lost my husband, and I fell in love with you at first sight; I am urged to be united with you in marriage.' Having heard Madam White's proposal, Hsü Hsüan said he also agreed to the wonderful idea! They got married immediately.

The seventh of the seventh month was the birthday of the illustrious and mighty Dragon King. Hsü Hsüan was anxious to go to the Golden Mountain Monastery to burn incense. Disregarding Madam White's apprehension, he set out there. All of a sudden, a storm blew up. As the crowd watched, a skiff appeared in the distance, borne on the crest of the waves. Hsü Hsüan who was among the waiting crowd spoke to Chiang Ho, his companion: 'What a storm!' Then from the edge of the water, Madam White called aloud to him: 'Why didn't you return? Come aboard at once!' Unfortunately, the abbot of the Monastery, Fa Hai, saw her and chased her away, saying: 'Depraved creature! Dare you invade these holy precincts?' The abbot told Hsü Hsüan that his wife was not human but an evil spirit; Hsü Hsüan begged the monk to deliver him from the bewitching power of his wife. The monk took his begging bowl from his sleeve and handed it to Hsü Hsüan, saying: 'When you reach home, put this bowl over her head like a hood and press it down.' When he returned home, as soon as he saw Madam White off guard, he crept up from behind and clapped the begging bowl on her head. Then the great Master Fa Hai appeared on the scene; having done his chanting, he gently lifted the begging bowl. The maid turned out to be a small green lizard of just over a foot long, while Madam White had reverted to a three foot white python. The venerable monk picked up the two tame creatures with his hand and dropped them into the begging bowl; depositing the bowl on the ground before Thunder Peak Monastery, he ordered men to erect a pagoda and to encase the bowl and keep it there for thousands of years.

The popular story describes a python which became a brave woman attacking bitterly the tyranny of feudal society. In pursuit of her own happiness she struggled undauntedly against feudal shackles. The kind and gentle Madam White was gifted with indomitable courage, and thus she held out desperately for her hopeless love for Hsü Hsüan. Standing for the miserable and grievous lot of many women, she undoubtedly aroused profound sympathy; on the other hand, she angrily indicted and accused Fa Hai for wickedly oppressing women. For instead of engrossing himself in prayers the monk intruded upon the marriage union and life. By her bitter, witty and incisive criticisms Madam White struck the monk to the heart and castigated his arrogance. She upbraided the monk with being an iniquitous symbol of feudal power for

breaking a young couple's marriage bond. The story also shows that humble folk pray for elusive worldly happiness. For one hundred years, the story of Madam White many times has been revised and refined, and is relished by myriads of readers.

CONCLUSION

Chinese civilization centered on the areas along the Yellow River about three thousand years ago; forests abounded that were inundated with great floods. There were venomous serpents and ferocious beats. During primeval times the Chinese people struggled against nature. In face of these unsurmountable obstacles, they began to conceive gods as part man and part animal. Their earliest ancestors, Fu Hsi and Nü Wa, had a serpent's body and a man's head; they belonged to a snake tribe. They worshipped the snake as a totem and wore its skin as a mark of respect; the snake was worshipped because of its phallic form and thus its tenacity of life. Fu Hsi and Nü Wa were also worshipped not because they were the progenitors of mankind, but because they symbolically represented the propagation of the human race by marriage, which does have vital importance; in the form of serpents, they also represented fertility and fecundity in nature. This is in accord with the traditional belief of the Chinese, particularly the farmers, that in the year of the snake timely wind and rain promise prosperity. Madam White, the snake personified, married her benefactor Hsü Hsüan and bore him a son. Cleaving to her husband, she fiercely opposed the monk of the Golden Mountain Monastery and boldly defied the feudal oppression of women. Madam White derided the maltreatment of women in society and enlisted the sympathy of the public. Although she lost the battle against Fa Hai, the monk, her assertion on women's rights and dignity have drawn attention to, and aroused awareness of how women have been wronged. Significantly enough, we call her blessed and cherish her memory always.

NOTES

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2. B. H. Stricker, *De Grote Zeeslang*, Leiden, 1953, pp. 18–19.
3. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, Humanistic themes in the Art of the Renaissance. Torchbook edition, New York, 1962, p. 72.
4. *Kuang Po Wu Chih*, Vol. 9, Wu Nien Li Yün Chi.
5. *Y Shih*, Vol. 1, Wu Nien Li Yün Chi.
6. *Y Wen*, Vol. 3, Fong Hsu Tung Yi.
7. *Huai Nan Tzu*, Lan Ming Pien.
8. Three Sovereigns were Fu Hsi, Sen Nung and Huang Ti.
9. Paul Chao, Totemism in China, *Journal of the Anthropological Society*, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 1976.
10. Ch'u Tz'u, Ta Chao; *Shih Chi*, Fong Zen Shuh.
11. *Shan Hai Ching*, Vol. 10, Hai Nei Nan Ching.
12. *Shan Hai Ching*, Vol. 17, Ta Huang Pei Ching and Vol. 8, Hai Wai Pei Ching.
13. *Shan Hai Ching*, Hsi Shan Ching and Pei Shan Ching.
14. *Shan Hai Ching*, Chung Shan Ching.
15. *Shan Hai Ching*, Hai Wai Pei Ching.
16. *Chuang Tz'u*, Vol. 7, Ta Shing, p. 5, *Ssu Pu Pei Yao*.
17. Wang Chung, *Lung Heng*, Vol. 6, p. 4a in *Ssu Pu Pei Yao*.
18. Ti Hao, T'ung Hsü Pien, Vol. 19, pp. 9b and 11b.
19. *Shu Ching Chi Chuan*, Vol. 6, Hung Fan; *Li Chi*, Vol. 6, The Monthly Commands.
20. *Hsi-hu Yu Lan Chih*, Chung-hua Press, 1958, pp. 34–35.